

Case for merging dental college and Medical Center not proved

In the decade since the State of Nebraska agreed to bring Omaha's financially-distressed municipal university into the University of Nebraska system, landmark intra-institutional changes have taken place.

Some of them were patently sensible, so much so that critics strained in objecting.

It made sense to move the Graduate School of Social Work from Lincoln to Omaha. Social work students are benefitted if they gain valuable experiences in a genuine metropolitan environment, where economic divisions and social and racial tensions are a bigger part of the everyday fabric than they are in smaller communities.

As long as the transfer involved everything and everybody, it also made demonstrated sense to move the School of Pharmacy, again from the Lincoln campus, to the Medical Center in Omaha.

But now we come to a different animal, a proposed shift of administrative control of the College of Dentistry from UNL to the Medical Center in Omaha. However the college itself, physically, would remain where it is, on the UNL East Campus. Existing educational activities, faculty and students would stay there, too.

In 1976, an American Dental Association Commission on Accreditation toured the dental college. It voiced concern "there is not better liaison and interdisciplinary rapport with medicine and other health related professions." Improved "cooperative efforts" between the college and the Medical Center were urged.

Using that as a springboard, the university's top executives directed creation of a review committee. Interestingly, the committee's charge was not that it investigate better avenues of cooperation, as the accreditation team had recommended. Rather, its assignment was "to explore in some detail the advantages and disadvantages of administratively incorporating the College of Dentistry into the Medical Center."

At that point, suspicions naturally arose. Was this deal already cut?

Last November the committee provided an unusually brief — for the prolix academic world — 3½-page double-spaced report. The advantages of administrative

merger summarily were balanced against the disadvantages. The advantages won.

Several of the supposed disadvantages were downgraded to rebuttable — and immediately rebutted — "concerns." But "detail" and hard data supporting the committee's conclusion backing the takeover of the dental college did not accompany the report.

Read between the lines, however, are implicit requirements for increased tax expenditures to pay for "new instructional programs," mainly in Omaha.

The dental college faculty is divided on the question; our understanding, unofficially, is that the split is something like 30 against, 23 or 24 for. Four of the ten committee members backing the merger are dental college teachers. On the other hand, both dental college representatives on the UNL faculty senate are reported opposed.

There is some belief that since the Medical Center faculty has had markedly higher salaries in the past, the merger represents a chance for dental college profs to better themselves. That might be so. Unquestionably within the entire university budget, the Medical Center would become a proportionately larger entity and UNL smaller, a fact with interesting potential ramifications.

Even in a long-winded editorial, which this is, many of the related elements and nuances can't be examined. That omission risks distortion.

Nevertheless, that which is on the available record is nowhere near persuasive enough to allow agreement with the proposed administrative incorporation of the dental college into the Medical Center.

If better cooperation is needed to improve the educational experiences of dental students, such efforts ought to be plotted and well tested. The university should travel that logical route before it is dismissed out of hand.

Not until cooperative ventures are graded failures, not until speculative gains in educational offerings for dental students are better demonstrated and not until all reasonably expectable extra tax costs of merger are laid on the table should the incorporation venture be carried any further.